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ABSTRACT

Embedded in a sensitive instructional context rather than a stifling testing atmosphere, diagnostic lessons provide assessment that is reliable, practical, valid, and efficient. In this type of assessment, there are several determiners of instructional placement: (1) students' propensity to adapt strategies as a result of specified instruction, (2) the teacher investment necessary to engage the student in an active interpretation of text, and (3) the amount of task modification necessary to create the desired reading change. When assessment and instruction interface, the teacher evaluates the dynamic interplay of the following components of the two processes: task, situational context, method of instruction, child's strategies, and text. Generally, diagnostic lessons provide a three-stage procedure for assessing students' ability to profit from instruction. The first stage establishes a baseline performance level based on an "at sight," unassisted reading of the first section of a selected text. During the second stage, instructional hypotheses based on this reading are implemented as students are taught the middle section of the text. The final stage determines the reading growth resulting from modifications made during instruction. If the instruction was appropriate, students should be able to read the text near the independent reading level. Twenty references are listed. (JD)

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Diagnostic Lessons as Assessment

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DIAGNOSTIC LESSONS AS ASSESSMENT

The reverence for standardized testing in the United States results from a systemic problem reflecting the society's lack of confidence in teachers and the public's cry for accountability. As a result we have moved from selecting tests that measure the goals of reading instruction to selecting tests that become the goals of reading instruction. Farr and Carey (1986) delineate the pattern: "The public becomes disenchanted with education," reforms are suggested. "Reform efforts are focused on discrete, measurable education outcomes" and subsequently tests are developed to assess those objectives. Then "school systems are told to emphasize the frameworks (objectives) that have been developed. . .As a result of the focused instruction, test scores go up." Then the "education policy makers and leaders proclaim that their reforms have improved education." (pp.208-209) With this accountability framework, has come dissension among parents, teachers, and researchers. This prevalent snap shot approach to assessment is questioned by classroom teachers as they admonish administrators that a single score resulting from a week long, tension-laden, decontextualized experience cannot represent the eager, bright minds that abound in their classrooms. Parents are questioning the labeling and tracking of their children in special programs as they review a myriad of test scores that describe deficits without describing instructional alternatives. They complete the parent conference with a list of specific

objectives that must be obtained without a mention of how their child will be instructed and leave the school wondering if anyone will ever understand what a delightful human being their child is. This dissension among parents and teachers is shared by researchers who view reading as a cognitive process. Stated succinctly "Research on the reading process indicates that reading cannot be fractionated into a set of separate skills; to do so is to misunderstand reading behavior. Additionally, many tests attempt to assess mastery of these skills though research indicates that the concept of the mastery of reading is anathema to a constantly developing behavior." (Farr and Carey, 1986 p. 17) These three groups are searching for new ways to assess reading behavior that will affect appropriate decisions about instruction. This paper offers one solution to the antiquated "idol" of testing.

For assessment to guide instruction, the answer is quite simple. Simply find something the student can read and begin to teach. Then introduce increasingly more complex reading activities, while at the same time providing explicit instruction in those strategies necessary to actively read and comprehend the more difficult text. Finally, systematically observe the effect of the instructional modifications on reading performance. Instruction does not stop in order to assess. Instead, assessment becomes the identification of the instructional conditions under which the student can attain his highest reading performance. In this type of assessment, referred to as

diagnostic lessons, assessment and instruction are dual processes that interface rather than separate processes. Diagnostic lessons as assessment change the traditional role of the teacher. Instead of a test-giver, manager of materials, and facilitator, the teacher becomes a participant in the assessment process by restructuring the reading event to meet the expanding cognitive needs of the student. She "must be sensitive to the child's needs at any stage of the process. She must engage in on-line diagnosis that will inform her level of participation, a level of participation that is finely tuned to the child's changing cognitive status." (Baker and Brown, 1984 p. 382)

Embedded in an instructional context rather than in the stifling context of testing, diagnostic lessons provide an assessment that is reliable, practical, valid and efficient. Diagnostic lessons are practical because suggestions for instruction can be incorporated immediately. Predictions made about reading performance are confirmed by matching and adapting instruction to the idiosyncratic nature of the reader; therefore instruction becomes an integral part of assessment. (Johnston, 1984) Second, this type of assessment is valid because the actual instructional situation is used to assess the student's performance. These lessons provide information about the strategies a student uses to derive meaning from text. Diagnostic lessons are "a situation in which the child's behavior as a learner can be carefully observed and evaluated." (Harris and Sipay, 1985, p.226) Third, this assessment is based on

patterns of interactions during the reading event, rather than a single comprehension error or word identification error. Through repeated instructional opportunities the teacher mentally records the variations in responses due to these interactions. As Pearson and Johnson (1978) state ". . .instruction itself allows you (the teacher) opportunities to assess student performance and progress on various comprehension tasks. . . because it is continuous and based upon many samples of behavior, chances are it will be useful in making decisions about students."(pp. 218-219) Therefore, diagnostic lessons are reliable. Finally, the assessment is efficient because learning does not stop in order to test. As Feuerstein suggests, the teacher has an excellent opportunity to analyze areas of "strengths and weaknesses. . . and. . .preferential strategies". . .that will affect "the desired modification in the most efficient and economical way." (Feuerstein, 1979 p. 92)

Determiners of Placement

During a diagnostic lesson, the teacher assesses the learning potential of each student, i.e. the rate at which the student can profit from her instruction. She becomes a teacher-observer and the child becomes an active learner. In this type of assessment, the student's propensity to adapt strategies as a result of specified instruction is one of the determiners of instructional placement. This determiner is based on the "difference between the level of unaided performance a child can achieve, and the

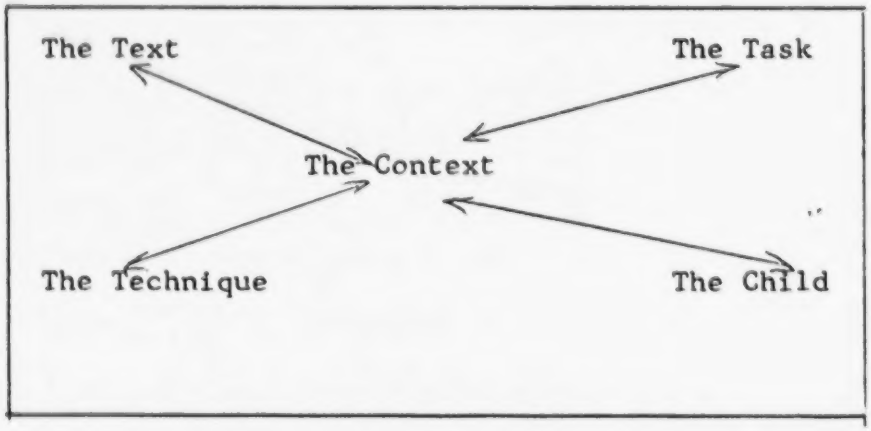
level he could achieve with aid. Not only are the levels within the zone of importance, so is width of that zone, with a greater zone range indicative of greater learning potential." (Powell, 1984 p.248)

Another determiner is the amount of teacher investment necessary to engage the student in an active interpretation of text. (Feuerstein, 1979) If teacher investment is extremely high, then changes in the instruction that decrease the complexity of the task for the learner are needed. For example, an easier, less complex text may facilitate learning. If the teacher investment is low, then changes in instruction that increase the complexity of the task (a more difficult text) and demand a wider application across reading text and tasks are needed. Therefore, the amount of teacher-directed instruction necessary for a student to internalize new learning is assessed to determine the student's instructional placement.

A third determiner of instructional placement is the amount of task modification necessary to create the desired reading change. (Feuerstein, 1979) During instruction the teacher modifies the task as needed to create learning. Sometimes the modification is nothing more that asking a student to support an answer in the text. However, it can mean that a teacher needs to have the student read smaller segments of the text, then ask a direct question, model how to construct an answer, and finally, ask the student to integrate the information with background knowledge.

The components of assessment

When assessment and instruction interface, the many facets of instruction; (the task, the situational context, the method of instruction, the child's strategies and the text), become components of the evaluation process. The teacher evaluates the dynamic interplay of these variables instead of the recording of student's answers to contrived questions. The task is what the child is asked to do and the technique shows the student "how" to complete the task. The text or what is read influences the child's response during the reading event. The teacher continuously evaluates the student's performance during instruction but equally important she reflects on the context that surrounds the instructional interactions. Each of these five components influence reading performance during any given reading event.



The Reading Event

THE TASK. Children are often mystified when trying to figure out what task they are to complete during an assessment. In fact, many tests evaluate precisely that: the rapidity with which the child can figure out the task. It is not unusual that after reading a paragraph and being asked literal questions, children ask for a second chance, now that they know what you want for an answer. However, in a diagnostic lesson, the teacher evaluates the task as it is presented, segments those tasks that are difficult for the student and notes which modifications produce a change in reading performance. As Cioffi and Carney (1983) state "when a child fails to respond to a question at the literal level after reading the text silently, the lack of response itself is of limited value." (p. 765) By restructuring the task, the teacher can evaluate probable hypotheses about the student's responses. She can investigate a decoding problem by asking the student to read the selection orally. Or she can rephrase the question to facilitate an integration of background knowledge with the text. For example, after reading "The Last Days of Darkness, Part One," in Ginn's fourth grade basal text, the teacher asked the following question; "Why was Seth more irritated than frightened?" which required an evaluation of detailed information in the story and integrating this information with prior knowledge. Since the student could not answer the question, the teacher rephrased the question and asked the following series "What had Seth forgotten? Have you ever gone camping and forgotten something? How did you feel? Do you think

Seth was feeling that way too. What was the author trying to tell you about Seth? This series of questions resulted in the same kind of comprehension, but the task had changed from a non-literal response requiring integration of information by the student to a sequence of literal responses supplied by the student that were woven together by leading questions from the teacher to form the non-literal response.

THE TEXT. Traditionally, variation in reading performance as measured by standardized test has been more an indication of extensive knowledge about a lot of topics rather than the ability to read and comprehend. (Anderson, et. al., 1985) Tests are constructed to sample reader response to a variety of text structures and topics so that these effects are randomized. However, when using diagnostic lessons, the teacher examines the text to assess its influence on instruction. Then she teaches text structures in a series of diagnostic lessons to assess the effect knowledge about text structures has on reader response. Passage length, content and complexity of the text, density of information, word choices, text structure and the elaboration of information are characteristics that affect reader response. (Graves, 1986) The teacher examines the text to assess its effect on student reading performance and then modifies instruction to assess the student's ability to learn text structures as a result of instruction. As Johnston and Pearson (1982) state "The common types of structure which occur in content-area texts could be

taught. . .If structures are taught, then such knowledge becomes a target for assessment--we need to know whether or not our instruction has worked." (p. 136)

THE CHILD. Bringing to the task and the text their own knowledge and strategies, each learner performs in distinctively different ways; therefore, the teacher observes the student's interactions within the reading event. Initially, she identifies an instructional level where the child can benefit from teacher-directed instruction. Concurrently, she finds out what the child already knows about the task of reading and the content that she is to teach. The teacher assesses text-related knowledge such as knowledge of textual organizations, (story grammar, etc.) as well as level of performance. Equally important, she also assesses task-related knowledge such as the level of skill development and perception of the reading task.

Students can be evaluated not only on <u>what</u> they already know (knowledge base), but also on <u>how</u> they integrate new information with what we already know (strategy use). Some students select meaning cues while others select graphic cues. Some students rely heavily on their background knowledge while other students use only the text to form hypothesis while they are reading. Some students summarize stories giving the overall gist of the text while other students give explicitly stated information. Some students revise and monitor their model of meaning readily while other students need concrete facts before they revise t ei

model of meaning. (Spiro and Myers, 1984) These strategies include patterns of organizing knowledge, cue and strategy selection, and monitoring and shifting of these strategies. The teacher evaluates the student's knowledge base and strategy use during a series of diagnostic lessons.

THE TECHNIQUE. During the diagnostic lesson the teacher analyzes the effect that the intervention or the technique has on student responses. During the lesson, the teacher thinks about how a child will best profit from her instruction. Subsequently, she analyzes how various techniques approach instruction so that she can match the child's learning strategies with the most efficient instructional technique. According to Pearson and Johnson (1978 p.88) Typically, any developmental reading program is a combination of skills activities component. . and a story-reading component." The teacher evaluates whether a technique is to introduce a skill in isolation or if the technique is to help the student learn more about reading stories. Some techniques incorporate strategy instruction as they teach skills, while other techniques focus only on the skills. (Samuels, 1980) Techniques differ on when they are implemented during the lesson (before, during, or after). Some techniques develop prerequisite knowledge in order to heighten story understanding while other techniques focus on developing active reading during the story. (McNeil, 1984) Equally important is the amount and kind of direct instruction provided

during its implementation. Some techniques require that the teacher present information in a non-directive format and simply provide thoughtful questions and support for reading. Other techniques require that the teacher direct the student's learning by modeling how the strategy is to be used when reading. (Tierney, 1982) Therefore, the teacher assesses how various techniques present reading tasks.

THE CONTEXT. The interactive context of instruction plays a key role in influencing the learning that occurs during the instructional event. For example, Harste, Burke, and Woodward (1982) found that children's story retellings were more complete when conveyed to a peer who had not read the story than when conveyed to a teacher who had read the story. Drawing implications from the research with inner-city Black children's language production, Cioffi and Carney (1983) illustrate the effect that context has on assessment. When Labov (1972) changed the interview from a testing situation to a social situation, he found that the "children possess a rich, flexible and logically consistent language" rather than the "inability to express and manipulate logical relationships" as previously reported. (Cioffi and Carney, 1983, p. 765-766.) Therefore, the teacher must be sensitive to the context of instruction-assessment and how it influences the response of the student. Her feedback can engage the student in a meaning search to integrate the written text with background knowledge or it can inhibit an exchange of

relevant information by focusing on irrelevant facts unconnected to the reader's knowledge.

The Procedures

The diagnostic lesson is a three-stage procedure for assessing a student's ability to profit from instruction. Prior to the diagnostic lesson, a text at instructional reading level is selected based on informal assessment of reading performance. Instructional reading level is defined as the level where the student will profit from mediated instruction. (Walker, In Press) A decision to evaluate oral or silent reading is made, a text is selected and divided into three sections. Then a diagnostic lesson is conducted.

The first stage establishes baseline performance level where the first section of the selected text is read "at sight" and without assistance. The section is either read orally to investigate a print processing concern or read silently to investigate a meaning processing concern. This section is then analyzed using quantitative (error rate and percent of comprehension) and qualitative assessment (miscues and miscomprehension) frameworks. (Walker, in press) During the second stage, the middle section of the passage is taught to investigate instructional hypotheses. By assesses the relative influences of the components of assessment (the task, text, technique, child, and context), the teacher develops her hypotheses about the student's learning. The teacher observes

the changes she makes in order to ensure text interpretation. The adjustments include a wide range of possibilities that could be as simple as changing the words that are said to children when they encounter an unknown word, to modifying the complex interaction among the text, teaching technique and the instructional setting. The teacher analyzes the effect these modifications have on reading performance so that productive changes can be repeated. Stage three, the final stage, establishes the amount of reading growth that resulted from modifications made during instruction. To assess the degree of change, the third section is read like the first section, "at sight" and without assistance. As a result of the mediated instruction during stage two, there should be quantitative and qualitative changes in reading performance. If instruction was appropriate, the text should be read near the independent reading level as established through quantitative assessment. Furthermore, appropriate instruction results in a predictive meaning base for the story; therefore, the qualitative patterns of reading should reflect a more integrated use of reader-based processing and text-based processing.

Summary

This three-stage procedure creates an interface between assessment and instruction allowing the teacher to establish the instructional conditions necessary for a student to internalize complex reading behaviors as they are introduced. Evaluating

the instructional interactions, the student's reading behavior is viewed as a product of a matrix of interactions, rather than a single variation of the often sterile testing situation. Teaching as assessment takes into account the natural classroom interactions between the child, the teacher, the technique, the text and the task. Rather than controlling the small components, the teacher evaluates the interactions and their relative influence on reader response. Reading assessment is redirected to the interrelationship of the components rather than student deficits. Student deficits, then, are redefined to describe the instructional conditions under which learning can occur. Teaching as assessment is real teaching and real assessment. It allows the teacher to adjust instruction, observe changes in reading behavior and introduce more appropriately complex instructional tasks.

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